

Making and doing society by making family networks: academia and policy on social cohesion in child and family social work

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Social cohesion has received momentum in research and policy in response to a rapidly changing society. Restoring social cohesion became a priority on the (European) political agenda as a result of societal developments, such as globalization and migration that have led to an increasing diversity and heterogeneity. Social work practices have been placed high on the European agenda to promote social cohesion. A particular field framed to promote social cohesion are child and family services where children are depicted as potential 'brokers of relations' meaning that in the creation of networks, community building and parenting, children can be facilitators. Despite the joined academic and political attention for social cohesion, it appears that if there is one thing we agree on, it is that there is no agreement on what social cohesion is. This leads to the paradoxical situation in which child and family services are characterized as ideal to foster social cohesion while there is little research on what this may mean. The question then is how conceptualizations in child and family social work literature relate to recent conceptualizations of social cohesion (RQ1), How policy-makers conceptualize social cohesion in reaction to the family policies (RQ2) and to what social cohesion should lead (RQ3). Using a multi-method design, combining a systematic narrative literature review (N=76) with thematic analysis of policy documents (N=44) and semi-structured interviews with policy makers (N=14) as they are key actors in the policymaking process as well as in the coordination and implementation of policy in child and family social work practices. Our study suggests that social cohesion is overshadowed by a conceptualization of social cohesion as social capital that should lead to an inclusive society with shared norms and values. Yet, the very concept of "shared norms and values" is highly disputed. Moreover, the aim to achieve an inclusive society by promoting social cohesion paradoxically seems contingent with the introduction of exclusive measures targeting specific

groups of families and reinforcing the individual responsibilities of families. We argue that a narrow conceptualisation of social cohesion as a function of child and family social work hinders taking into account the growing diversity and – in so doing – child and family social work may miss out on an important contemporary social challenge.